

Can Washington Successfully Prepare for the Future?



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The impossibility of predicting the future does not obviate the imperative of mulling the uncertain.

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Donald Rumsfeld famously sent out mini-memos known as “snowflakes” to his staff when he was secretary of defense. One such snowflake that has been getting renewed attention is titled “Predicting the Future,” dated April 12, 2001, just five months before the terrorist attacks that would drastically reorient U.S. foreign policy. It advised President George W. Bush to review a one-page caution that Pentagon official Linton Wells II had prepared to inform the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review. Starting in 1900, Wells demonstrated how little the developments that shaped world affairs in each decade of the twentieth century corresponded to those that would have been plausibly anticipated at its outset. He concluded: “I’m not sure what 2010 will look like, but I’m sure that it will be very little like we expect, so we should plan accordingly.”

RAND undertook an exercise similar to Wells’ this past fall, reviewing three quarter-century periods: 1910–1935, 1950–1975 and 1990–2015. A number of phenomena endured across them, including gains in life expectancy, the expansion of gross world product and the acceleration of urbanization. Those windows of time are more notable, however, for the discontinuities that shaped them—discontinuities that attest both to the challenge of prediction and the limits of planning.

1910–1935

In 1910, what did U.S. policymakers and thinkers expect from the next quarter-century? William Howard Taft’s 1909 inaugural address did not contemplate anything akin to U.S. involvement in World War I five years later or the Great Depression twenty years later. Rather, Taft noted that the “distance of our shores from Europe and Asia of course reduces the necessity for maintaining under arms a great army” (though he did emphasize the need for “a nucleus out of which a suitable force can quickly grow”). Taft was also preoccupied by the need to reduce tariffs, boost U.S. exports to support a growing U.S. profile in the Americas and the Far East (“dollar diplomacy”), close an anticipated \$100 million deficit caused by the recession that had followed the financial panic of 1907, and manage domestic political frictions caused by Asian immigration and growing tensions between white and black Americans. The inward focus he adopted would be interrupted briefly when the United States

entered the World War I, and then come to an abrupt end when it entered World War II, less than three decades after the conclusion of Taft's presidency.

1950–1975

Harry Truman declared in his 1950 State of the Union Address that “[t]he first half of this century will be known as the most turbulent and eventful period in recorded history. The swift pace of events promises to make the next 50 years decisive in the history of man on this planet.” Truman assessed that while the United States had been “devoted largely to [its] own internal affairs” a half-century ago, “no corner of the earth [could now] be isolated from the affairs of mankind.” He observed that, on account of the devastation that Western Europe and the Asia-Pacific had sustained during World War II, the United States had moved from the periphery of world affairs to its center.

Truman can be credited with being more prescient than most. He correctly predicted that the United States would continue to play a central role in world affairs in the coming decades. His central focus, however, was on potential threats emanating from Europe; little did he anticipate that the United States would soon find itself bogged down in two wars in Asia. One could contend, moreover, that the period between 1950 and 1975 was as “turbulent” and “eventful” as its predecessor, if not more: It witnessed the Cuban Missile Crisis (which the late historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. famously called “the most dangerous moment in human history”); a massive wave of decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s; and a series of civil wars, proxy wars and genocides.

1990–2015

In the preface to the March 1990 national security strategy, George H. W. Bush observed that “after four decades, the international landscape is marked by change that is breathtaking in its character, dimension, and pace. The familiar moorings of postwar security policy are being loosened by developments that were barely imagined years or even months ago.” Little could the president or any of his contemporaries have imagined just how much those moorings would loosen in the years to come: The ensuing quarter-century brought the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union; the invention of the Internet; the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001;

the inauguration of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter; the global financial crisis; the resurgence of China; the election of the first African-American U.S. president; and the collapse of a seemingly unbreakable order in the Middle East.

In the early 1990s, leading U.S. thinkers spoke of “a unipolar moment”: U.S. preeminence seemed so uncontested at the time that many of them debated what exactly the United States should do with its prodigious inheritance of power. Democracy and capitalism, meanwhile, appeared to be, if not permanently triumphant, then at least confidently ascendant. A quarter-century later, the United States confronted the Islamic State, a revanchist Russia, a newly assertive China and a new de facto nuclear power in North Korea. Reawakened nationalism, meanwhile, had cast doubt on the resilience of the European project, and the disintegration of regimes across the Middle East had produced the worst refugee crisis since the end of World War II.

2015–2040?

Britain’s decision to exit the European Union and Donald Trump’s unexpected election victory are but two markers that suggest that the coming quarter-century, like its predecessors, will defy prediction. Who could have imagined at the outset of the twenty-first century that some of the fiercest criticism of the postwar order would emerge from within its chief architects? Massive waves of migration, demographic shifts, and the progression of artificial intelligence, to name just a few other phenomena, also promise to leave a substantial mark.

The cursory review above suggests several lessons. First, it is misguided to speak of “the future.” There are, instead, any number of alternative futures. Second, observers and analysts should be humble about the limits to their predictive abilities. RAND warned in a July 1990 report that “problem formulations suppress uncertainty about the world and ignore the capacity of the analyzed systems to adapt to the unanticipated.”

Third, and perhaps most importantly, policymakers, especially at the highest levels, need an occasional time-out to appraise the major trends that are driving world affairs and anticipate a range of potential paths for each of them. As Secretary of State, George Shultz famously set aside an hour each week to step away from the day’s churn and consider America’s strategic

priorities. *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt asked him to explain his rationale for doing so: “Shultz . . . told me that his hour of solitude was the only way he could find time to think about the strategic aspects of his job. Otherwise, he would be constantly pulled into moment-to-moment tactical issues, never able to focus on larger questions of the national interest.”

The impossibility of predicting the future does not obviate the imperative of mulling the uncertain: If today’s policymakers cannot build in windows of time to think imaginatively about the pursuit of America’s strategic objectives, they will find it difficult to overcome the inertia that drives the country’s current foreign policy—let alone to take a bird’s-eye view of the role it can and should play in shaping an increasingly complex, chaotic world.

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